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13 November 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Current Intelligence

SUBJECT : Moscow and the Middle East--A View of
Current Soviet Strategy

1. There is currently much confusion about Soviet policy in the Middle East. Most of the perplexity, arising from Moscow's seemingly contradictory pursuit of peace and militant support for the Arabs, is due to an oversimplified view of what the Soviet Union is trying to achieve. When the Soviets deal seriously with the US in negotiations, hopes rise that Moscow is eager for a settlement. On the other hand, when the Soviets publicly endorse the fedayeen or attack US policy in the area, it is assumed that they have given up on a political settlement.

2. Both of those interpretations are too extreme. The Soviet Union is indeed following a dual strategy in the Middle East and doing so with considerable success. The Soviets are genuinely interested in a political settlement in the area and have negotiated seriously to achieve it. At the same time, however, Moscow recognizes the enormous obstacles to such a settlement and is taking what it must consider to be realistic measures to maintain and strengthen its credit with the Arab governments and the guerrilla movement.

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3. It is argued by some that the stated Soviet desire for a settlement is purely a political ploy. However, there are several reasons why Moscow would welcome a settlement on terms acceptable to Nasir. The return of occupied territories to the Arabs would be a real coup for Moscow in the Middle East. Although a settlement might reduce Arab dependence on Soviet arms, it is naive to believe that tension and suspicion would suddenly disappear from the Middle East. Thus, Soviet military aid and political support would still be in demand. In addition, it is clear that Moscow does not want a new war, which would mean either another beating for the Arabs or the risk of a US-Soviet confrontation. Finally, Moscow probably is concerned that continued tension will further increase fedayeen influence and radicalize the Middle East to a dangerous, irreversible, and--most important to the Soviets--uncontrollable degree.

4. There is in fact considerable evidence of genuine Soviet interest in a settlement. The act of negotiating at all with the US bears some political risk for Moscow, especially with regard to its relations with the more radical Arab states. Furthermore, the Soviets appear to be negotiating responsibly.

Soviet interest in a settlement is also evident in propaganda, which has continuously urged political normalization in the Middle East. The Arabs are exhorted to strengthen their political institutions and their economies rather than expending treasure and lives on military adventures.

5. Moscow's desire for a settlement, however, does not appear to have affected its realistic assessment of the poor chances for peace. For their part, the Soviets have demonstrated that they are unwilling to get out ahead of Cairo in negotiations with the US.

This is probably due to their desire that any resulting document be acceptable to Cairo and, of course, to avoid offending Nasir. The Soviets' pessimism on the chances for a settlement probably also stems from what they consider to be the US and Israeli failure to make necessary concessions. Paradoxically, Moscow is almost certainly worried too that the US will not be able to bring the Israelis along on already agreed points.

6. While promoting a political solution, the Soviets have been quick to take advantage of every opportunity to maintain and strengthen their position in the Middle East. They are continuing to build up their assets in the Arab countries, especially in Nasir's Egypt--the linchpin for Soviet activity in the area. The Soviet press has lavished praise on Nasir and has, with reservations, lauded his domestic and foreign policies. Soviet propaganda has also supported limited Egyptian military strikes against Israel and Moscow continues to channel large quantities of arms to the UAR as well as other Arab states. The Soviets are also trying to make inroads in formerly pro-western states such as Libya and Jordan, offering military and economic aid.

7. Moscow has missed few opportunities to enhance its reputation as protector and benefactor of the Arabs in the Middle East. It recently distorted Assistant Secretary Sisco's statement on Lebanese integrity, which was actually directed at Israel. It has also used the US Supreme Court's recent decision permitting Americans who fight in foreign armies to keep their citizenship to charge that many US citizens are fighting for Israel. When the recent Lebanese-fedayeen crisis broke, Moscow jumped in with both feet, simultaneously trumpeting the danger of US military intervention and trying behind the scenes to calm the situation. Both efforts appear to have been at least a qualified success.

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8. Moscow apparently believes it can no longer be the Arabs' chief benefactor without also lending support to the fedayeen. By deciding to provide the guerrillas with material, moral, and political support, the Soviets have given notice that they do not intend to be by-passed by new forces in the area, and that they hope to forestall other foreign influence in the fedayeen organizations while trying to establish their own. On balance, given fedayeen popularity and influence in the Arab world and Moscow's intention to be a force there, the USSR has little choice but to do something for the guerrillas. Still, Moscow is likely to avoid too close a commitment to their goals or activities, and will seek to maintain maximum flexibility.

9. There should be no surprise at the fact that the USSR is simultaneously pursuing two courses of action which contain conflicting features. Moscow cannot wish to abandon the negotiating track, since this would greatly increase the chances of renewed war. It naturally is using the negotiations to push for a settlement which would be acceptable to the Arabs and reflect credit upon itself. At the same time, the chances of success in this arena are so dim that the Soviets will not fail to strengthen their position with the Arabs as opportunities arise.

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